

Flood Insurance Program and will include floodproofing and other flood protection measures as appropriate.

[44 FR 44462, July 30, 1979]

**PART 651 [RESERVED]**

**PART 652—TECHNICAL SERVICE PROVIDER ASSISTANCE**

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SOURCE: 69 FR 69472, Nov. 29, 2004, unless otherwise noted.

**Subpart A—General Provisions**

SOURCE: 75 FR 6845, Feb. 12, 2010, unless otherwise noted.

**§ 652.1 Applicability.**

(a) The regulations in this part set forth the policies, procedures, and re-

quirements related to delivery of technical assistance by individuals and entities other than the Department, hereinafter referred to as technical service providers (TSPs). The Food Security Act of 1985, requires the Secretary to deliver technical assistance to eligible participants for implementation of its Title XII Programs and the conservation activities in the Agricultural Management Assistance Program, 7 U.S.C. 1524, directly, through an agreement with a third party provider, or at the option of the producer through payment to the producer for an approved third party provider. This regulation defines how a participant acquires technical service from a third party TSP, sets forth a certification and decertification process, and establishes a method to make payments for technical services.

(b) TSPs may provide technical services to eligible participants in conservation planning, education and outreach, and assistance with design and implementation of conservation practices applied on private land, Indian land, or where allowed by conservation program rules on public land.

(c) The Chief may implement this part in any of the 50 States, District of Columbia, Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Guam, Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianna Islands.

**§ 652.2 Definitions.**

The following definitions apply to this part and all documents issued in accordance with this part, unless specified otherwise:

*Approved list* means the list of individuals, private sector entities, or public agencies certified by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to provide technical services to a participant.

*Certification* means the action taken by NRCS to approve:

(1) An individual as meeting the minimum NRCS criteria for providing technical service for conservation planning or a specific conservation practice or system.

(2) An entity or public agency having an employee or employees that meet

the minimum NRCS criteria for providing technical service for conservation planning or a specific conservation practice or system.

*Chief* means the Chief of NRCS or designee.

*Conservation activity plan* means the conservation practices associated with plan development as authorized under the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Act).

*Conservation plan* means a record of the client's decisions and supporting information for treatment of a land unit or water as a result of the planning process that meets the Field Office Technical Guide quality criteria for each natural resource (soil, water, air, plants, and animals), and takes into account economic and social considerations. The plan describes the schedule of operations and activities needed to solve identified natural resource problems and takes advantage of opportunities at a conservation management system level. The needs of the client, the resources, and Federal, State, and local requirements will be met.

*Conservation practice* means a specified treatment, such as a structural or vegetative practice, or a land management practice that is planned and applied according to NRCS standards and specifications.

*Contribution agreement* means the instrument used to acquire technical services under the authority of 7 U.S.C. 6962a.

*Cooperative agreement* means the same as defined in the Federal Grants and Cooperative Agreement Act, 31 U.S.C. 6301 *et seq.*

*Department* means the NRCS, the Farm Service Agency, or any other agency or instrumentality of the Department of Agriculture (USDA) that is assigned responsibility for all or a part of a conservation program subject to this part.

*Eligible participant* means a producer, landowner, or entity that is participating in, or seeking to participate in, a conservation program covered by this rule in which the producer, landowner, or entity is otherwise eligible to participate.

*Entity* means a corporation, joint stock company, association, coopera-

tive, limited partnership, limited liability partnership, limited liability company, nonprofit organization, a member of a joint venture, or a member of a similar organization.

*Indian land* means all lands held in trust by the United States for individual Indians or tribes, or all lands, titles to which are held by individual Indians or tribes, subject to Federal restrictions against alienation or encumbrance, or all lands which are subject to the rights of use, occupancy, and benefit of certain tribes. The term Indian land also includes land for which the title is held in fee status by Indian tribes and the United States Government-owned land under the Bureau of Indian Affairs jurisdiction.

*Procurement contract* means the same as the term “contract” means under the Federal Grants and Cooperative Agreement Act, 31 U.S.C. 6301 *et seq.*

*Program contract* means the document that specifies the rights and obligations of any individual or entity that has been accepted for participation in a program authorized under Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985, or the Agricultural Management Assistance Program, authorized under 7 U.S.C. 1524.

*Public agency* means a unit or subdivision of Federal, State, local, or tribal government other than the Department.

*Recommending organization* means a professional organization, association, licensing board, or similar organization with which NRCS has entered into an agreement to recommend qualified individuals for NRCS certification as TSPs for specific technical services.

*Secretary* means the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture.

*State Conservationist* means the NRCS employee authorized to direct and supervise NRCS activities in a State, Caribbean Area, or Pacific Basin Area.

*Technical service* means the technical assistance provided by TSPs, including conservation planning; education and outreach; and the design, installation, and check-out of approved conservation practices.

*Technical service contract* means a document that specifies the rights and obligations of an eligible participant to obtain technical services from a TSP

where the eligible participant will not receive financial assistance for the implementation of the practice paid for in the technical service contract through participation in a Title XII conservation program or the Agricultural Management Assistance Program, 7 U.S.C. 1524.

*Technical service provider* means an individual, entity, Indian Tribe, or public agency either:

(1) Certified by NRCS and placed on the approved list to provide technical services to participants; or

(2) Selected by the Department to assist the Department in the implementation of conservation programs covered by this part through a procurement contract, contribution agreement, or cooperative agreement with the Department.

*Written agreement* means the document that specifies the rights and obligations of any individual or entity that has been authorized by NRCS to receive conservation planning assistance without having a program contract.

[75 FR 6845, Feb. 12, 2010, as amended at 75 FR 48273, Aug. 10, 2010]

### § 652.3 Administration.

(a) As provided in this part, the Department will provide technical assistance to participants directly, or at the option of the participant, through a TSP in accordance with the requirements of this part.

(b) The Chief of NRCS will direct and supervise the administration of the regulations in this part.

(c) NRCS will:

(1) Provide overall leadership and management for the development and administration of a TSP process;

(2) Consult with the Farm Service Agency and other appropriate agencies and entities concerning the availability and utilization of TSPs and the implementation of technical service;

(3) Establish policies, procedures, guidance, and criteria for certification, recertification, decertification, certification renewal, and implementation of the use of TSPs;

(4) Provide training to ensure that persons meet the certification criteria for certain technical expertise when there is a lack of training resources or market outside the agency for such

technical expertise. However, any training provided by the Department will be limited to training about Department regulations, policies, procedures, processes, and business and technical tools unique to NRCS; and

(5) Establish a process for verifying information provided to NRCS under this part.

(d) The Department will not make payments under a program contract or written agreement with a participant for technical services provided by a TSP unless the TSP is certified by NRCS for the services provided and is identified on the approved list.

(e) The Department may enter into procurement contracts, contribution agreements, cooperative agreements, or other appropriate instruments to assist the Department in providing technical assistance when implementing conservation programs covered by this part. The Department will ensure that such instruments contain the qualification and performance criteria necessary to ensure quality implementation of the goals and objectives of these conservation programs; therefore, when the Department obtains assistance from a TSP in this manner, the TSP is authorized to provide technical services and receive payment even if such TSP is not certified in accordance with subpart B, nor identified on the approved list.

(f) When a participant acquires technical services from a TSP, the Department is not a party to the agreement between the participant and the TSP. To ensure that quality implementation of the goals and objectives of the conservation programs are met, the TSP must be certified by NRCS in accordance with subpart B of this part and identified on the approved list. Upon request of NRCS, TSPs are required to submit copies of all transcripts, licensing, and certification documentation.

### § 652.4 Technical service standards.

(a) All technical services provided by TSPs must meet USDA standards and specifications as set forth in Departmental manuals, handbooks, guides, and other references for soils mapping and natural resources information, conservation planning, conservation

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practice application, and other areas of technical assistance.

(b) The Department will only pay a participant for technical services provided in accordance with established NRCS standards, specifications, and requirements. The Department must approve all new technologies and innovative practices, including interim standards and specifications, prior to a TSP initiating technical services for those technologies and practices.

(c) A TSP must assume responsibility in writing for the particular technical services provided. Technical services provided by the TSP must:

(1) Comply with all applicable Federal, State, tribal, and local laws and requirements;

(2) Meet applicable Department standards, specifications, and program requirements;

(3) Be consistent with the particular conservation program goals and objectives for which the program contract was entered into by the Department and the participant; and

(4) Incorporate alternatives that are both cost effective and appropriate to address the resource issues. Conservation alternatives will meet the objectives for the program and participant to whom assistance is provided.

(d) TSPs are responsible for the technical services provided, including any costs, damages, claims, liabilities, and judgments arising from past, present, and future negligent or wrongful acts or omissions of the TSP in connection with the technical service provided.

(e) The Department will not be in breach of any program contract or written agreement if it fails to implement conservation plans or practices or make payment for conservation plans or practices resulting from technical services that do not meet USDA standards and specifications or are not consistent with program requirements.

(f) The participant is responsible for complying with the terms and conditions of the program contract or written agreement, which includes meeting USDA technical standards and specifications for any technical services provided by a TSP.

(g) The TSP will report conservation accomplishments associated with the

technical services provided to the Department and the participant.

(h) To the extent allowed under State or tribal law, TSPs may utilize the services of subcontractors to provide specific technical services or expertise needed by the TSP, provided that the subcontractors are certified by NRCS in accordance with this part for the particular technical services to be provided and the technical services are provided in terms of their Certification Agreement. Payments will not be made for any technical services provided by uncertified subcontractors, except when such technical services are provided under the provisions of a procurement contract, cooperative agreement, or contribution agreement with the NRCS.

[75 FR 6845, Feb. 12, 2010, as amended at 79 FR 44640, Aug. 1, 2014]

**§ 652.5 Participant acquisition of technical services.**

(a) Participants may obtain technical assistance directly from the Department or, when available, from a TSP.

(b) To acquire technical assistance directly from the Department, participants should contact their local USDA Service Center.

(c) To acquire technical services from a TSP, participants must:

(1) Enter into and comply with a program contract or a written agreement prior to acquiring technical services; and

(2) Select a certified TSP from the approved list of TSPs.

(d) The Department may approve written agreements for technical assistance prior to program participation based on available funding and natural resource priorities as identified by the State Conservationist.

(e) The technical assistance indicated in paragraph (d) may include the development of conservation plans or activity plans suitable for subsequent incorporation into a program contract.

(f) The Department may make payment to eligible participants who have a technical service contract and utilize it for technical assistance from a TSP.

(g) The Department will identify in the particular program contract or

written agreement the payment provisions for TSPs hired directly by the participant.

(h) To obtain payment for technical services, participants must submit to the Department valid invoices, supporting documentation, and requests for payment. The Department will issue payment within 30 days of receiving these items. The Department may pay a participant for some or all of the costs associated with the technical services provided by a TSP hired by the participant, or upon receipt of an assignment of payment from the participant, make payment directly to the TSP.

(i) Participants must authorize in writing to the Department the disclosure of their records on file with the Department that they wish to make available to specific TSPs.

(j) Payments for technical services will be made only one time for the same technical service provided unless, as determined by the Department, the emergence of new technologies or major changes in the participant's farming or ranching operations necessitate the need for additional technical services.

(k) The Department will not make payment for activities or services that are customarily provided at no cost by a TSP to a participant as determined by the State Conservationist.

(l) Payment rates for technical services acquired by participants.

(1) NRCS will calculate TSP payment rates for technical services using national, regional, and locally determined price data.

(2) Establishing TSP payment rates.

(i) NRCS will establish guidelines to analyze the local pricing information using a standardized method.

(ii) NRCS will establish TSP payment rates for the various categories of technical services. NRCS will determine the rates according to NRCS regional and local cost data, procurement data, and market data.

(iii) National Headquarters will review and approve State payment rates to ensure consistency where similar resource conditions and agricultural operations exist. Payment rates may vary to some degree between or within States due to differences in State laws,

the cost of doing business, competition, and other variables.

(iv) National Headquarters and State levels will review payment rates annually or more frequently, as needed, and adjust the rates based upon data from existing procurement contracts, Federal cost rates, and other appropriate sources.

(v) NRCS may adjust payment rates, as needed, on a case-by-case basis in response to unusual conditions or unforeseen circumstances in delivering technical services such as highly complex technical situations, emergency conditions, serious threats to human health or the environment, or major resource limitations. In these cases, NRCS will set a case-specific TSP payment rate based on the Department's determination of the scope, magnitude, and timeliness of the technical services needed.

[75 FR 6845, Feb. 12, 2010, as amended at 79 FR 44640, Aug. 1, 2014]

#### **§ 652.6 Department delivery of technical services.**

(a) The Department may enter into a procurement contract, contribution agreement, cooperative agreement, or other appropriate instrument to assist the Department in providing technical assistance when implementing the conservation programs covered by this part.

(b) The Department may enter into a procurement contract, contribution agreement, cooperative agreement, or other appropriate instrument with TSPs to provide related technical assistance services that accelerate conservation program delivery. Related technical assistance services may include activities or services that facilitate the development, processing, or implementation of a program contract, such as recording conservation planning decisions and specifications.

(c) NRCS may enter into agreements with other agencies or with a non-Federal entity to provide technical services to eligible participants.

(d) The Department will ensure that such legal instruments contain qualification and performance criteria necessary to ensure quality implementation of these conservation programs.

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When the Department obtains assistance from a TSP through a procurement contract, contribution agreement, cooperative agreement, or other similar instrument, the TSP is authorized to provide technical services and receive payment even if such TSP is not certified in accordance with subpart B of this part nor identified on the approved list.

(e) The Department will implement procurement contracts, contribution agreements, cooperative agreements, and other appropriate instruments in accordance with applicable Federal acquisition or USDA Federal assistance rules and requirements for competency, quality, and selection, as appropriate. Any contract, contribution agreement, cooperative agreement, or other appropriate instrument entered into under this section will be for a minimum of one year, will not exceed 3 years in duration, and may be renewed upon mutual agreement of the parties.

(f) A TSP may not receive payment twice for the same technical service, such as once from a participant through a program contract or written agreement and then again through a separate contract or agreement made directly with the Department.

(g) The Department will, to the extent practicable, ensure that the amounts paid for technical service under this part are consistent across conservation program areas, unless specific conservation program requirements include additional tasks.

### § 652.7 Quality assurance.

(a) NRCS will review, in consultation with the Farm Service Agency, as appropriate, the quality of the technical services provided by TSPs. As a requirement of certification, TSPs must develop and maintain documentation in accordance with Departmental manuals, handbooks, and technical guidance for the technical services provided, and provide this documentation to NRCS and the participant when the particular technical service is completed. NRCS may utilize information obtained through its quality assurance process, documentation submitted by the TSP, and other relevant information in determining how to improve the quality of technical service, as well as

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determining whether to decertify a TSP under subpart C of this part.

(b) Upon discovery of a deficiency in the provision of technical service through its quality assurance process or other means, NRCS will, to the greatest extent practicable, send a notice to the TSP detailing the deficiency and requesting remedial action by the TSP. Failure by the TSP to promptly remedy the deficiency, or the occurrence of repeated deficiencies in providing technical services, may trigger the decertification process set forth in subpart C of this part. A failure by NRCS to identify a deficiency does not affect any action under the decertification process. TSPs are solely responsible for providing technical services that meet all NRCS standards and specifications.

### Subpart B—Certification

#### § 652.21 Certification criteria and requirements.

(a) To qualify for certification an individual must:

(1) Have the required technical training, education, and experience to perform the level of technical assistance for which certification is sought;

(2) Meet any applicable professional or business licensing or similar qualification standards established by State or Tribal law;

(3) Demonstrate, through documentation of training or experience, familiarity with NRCS guidelines, criteria, standards, and specifications as set forth in the applicable NRCS manuals, handbooks, field office technical guides, and supplements thereto for the planning and applying of specific conservation practices and management systems for which certification is sought; and

(4) Not be decertified in any State under subpart C of this part at the time of application for certification.

(b) To qualify for certification an entity or public agency must be authorized to provide such services in the jurisdiction and have a certified individual providing, in accordance with this part, technical services on its behalf.

(c) A technical service provider, as part of the certification by NRCS,

must enter into a Certification Agreement with NRCS specifying the terms and conditions of the certification, including adherence to the requirements of this part, and acknowledging that failure to meet these requirements may result in ineligibility to receive payments from the Department, either directly or through the participant, for the technical services provided or may result in decertification.

(d) NRCS will certify Technical Service Providers for a time period specified by NRCS in the Certification Agreement, not to exceed 3 years. Decertification and Renewal of Certification is administered in accordance with § 652.26.

(e) NRCS may, pursuant to 31 U.S.C. 9701, establish and collect fees for the certification of technical service providers.

**§ 652.22 Certification process for individuals.**

(a) In order to be considered for certification as a technical service provider, an individual must:

(1) Submit an Application for Certification to NRCS in accordance with this section;

(2) Request certification through a recommending organization pursuant to § 652.25; or

(3) Request certification through an application submitted by a private-sector entity or public agency pursuant to § 652.23 or § 652.24, as appropriate.

(b) The application must contain the documentation demonstrating that the individual meets all requirements of paragraph (a) of § 652.21.

(c) NRCS will, within 60 days of receipt of an application, make a determination on the application submitted by an individual under paragraph (a)(1) of this section and in accordance with paragraph (a) of § 652.21. If all requirements are met, NRCS will:

(1) Enter into a Certification Agreement and certify the applicant as qualified to provide technical services for a specific practice, category, or categories of technical service;

(2) Place the applicant on the list of approved technical service providers when certified; and

(3) Make available to the public the list of approved technical service pro-

viders by practice or category of technical services.

(d) NRCS may decertify an individual in accordance with the decertification process set forth in subpart C of this part.

**§ 652.23 Certification process for private-sector entities.**

(a) A private sector entity that applies for certification must identify, and provide supporting documentation, that it has the requisite professional and business licensure within the jurisdiction for which it seek certification, and that it employs at least one individual, authorized to act on its behalf that:

(1) Has received certification on an individual basis in accordance with § 652.22; or

(2) Seeks certification on an individual basis as part of the private-sector entity's certification and ensures that the requirements set forth in § 652.21(a) are contained within the private-sector entity's application to support such certification.

(b) NRCS will determine pursuant to § 652.22 whether the individual(s) identified in the private-sector entity's application meets the certification standards set forth in § 652.21 for the specific services the entity wishes to provide.

(c) NRCS will, within 60 days of receipt of an application, make a determination on the application submitted by an entity. If NRCS determines that all requirements for the private-sector entity and the identified individual(s) are met, NRCS will complete the actions described in paragraphs (c)(1) through (c)(3) of § 652.22.

(d) The Certification Agreement entered into with the private-sector entity shall:

(1) Identify the certified individuals who are authorized to perform technical services on behalf of and under the auspices of the entity's certification;

(2) Require that the entity has, at all times, an individual who is a certified technical service provider authorized to act on the entity's behalf;

(3) Require that the entity promptly provide an amended Certification Agreement to NRCS for approval when

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the list of certified individuals performing technical services under its auspices changes;

(4) Require that responsibility for any work performed by non-certified individuals be assumed by a certified individual who is authorized to act on the entity's behalf; and

(5) Require that the entity be legally responsible for the work performed by any individual working under the auspices of its certification.

(e) NRCS may, in accordance with the decertification process set forth in this part, decertify the private sector entity, the certified individual(s) acting under the auspices of its certification, or both the private sector entity and the certified individual(s) acting under the auspices of its certification.

### § 652.24 Certification process for public agencies.

(a) A public agency that applies for certification must identify, and provide supporting documentation, that it has the authority within the jurisdiction within which it seeks to provide technical services and an individual or individuals authorized to act on its behalf:

(1) Has been certified as an individual in accordance with § 652.22; or

(2) Seeks certification as an individual as part of the public agency's certification and sufficient information as set forth in § 652.21(a) is contained within the public agency's application to support such certification.

(b) NRCS shall determine whether the individual identified in the public agency's application meets the certification standards set forth in § 652.22.

(c) NRCS will, within 60 days of receipt of an application, make a determination on the application submitted by a public agency. If NRCS determines that all requirements for the public agency and the identified individual(s) are met, NRCS will perform the actions described in paragraph (c)(1) through (c)(3) of § 652.22. The Certification Agreement entered into with the public agency shall:

(1) Identify the certified individuals that are authorized to perform technical services on behalf of and under the auspices of the public agency's certification;

(2) Require that the public agency have, at all times, an individual that is a certified technical service provider and is an authorized official of the public agency;

(3) Require that the public agency promptly provide to NRCS for NRCS approval an amended Certification Agreement when the list of certified individuals performing technical services under its auspices changes;

(4) Require that responsibility for any work performed by non-certified individuals be assumed by a certified individual that is authorized to act on the public agency's behalf; and

(5) Require that the public agency be legally responsible for the work performed by any individual working under the auspices of its certification.

(d) NRCS may, in accordance with the decertification process set forth in subpart C of this part, decertify the public agency, the certified individual(s) acting under its auspices, or both the public agency and the certified individual(s) acting under its auspices.

### § 652.25 Alternative application process for individual certification.

(a) NRCS may enter into an agreement, including a memorandum of understanding or other appropriate instrument, with a recommending organization that NRCS determines has an adequate accreditation program in place to train, test, and evaluate candidates for competency in a particular area or areas of technical service delivery and whose accreditation program NRCS determines meets the certification criteria as set forth for the technical services to be provided.

(b) Recommending organizations will, pursuant to an agreement entered into with NRCS:

(1) Train, test, and evaluate candidates for competency in the area of technical service delivery;

(2) Recommend to NRCS individuals who it determines meet the NRCS certification requirements of § 652.21(a) for providing specific practices or categories of technical services;

(3) Inform the recommended individuals that they must meet the requirements of this part, including entering into a Certification Agreement with

NRCS, in order to provide technical services under this part;

(4) Reassess individuals that request renewal of their certification pursuant to § 652.26 through the recommendation of the organization; and

(5) Notify NRCS of any concerns or problems that may affect the organization's recommendation concerning the individual's certification, recertification, certification renewal, or technical service delivery.

(c) Pursuant to an agreement with NRCS, a recommending organization may provide to the appropriate NRCS official a current list of individuals identified by the recommending organization as meeting NRCS criteria as set forth in § 652.21(a) for specific practices or categories of technical service and recommend that the NRCS official certify these individuals as technical service providers in accordance with this part.

(d) NRCS will, within 60 days, make a determination on the recommendation for certification issued by the recommending organization. If NRCS determines that all requirements for certification are met by the recommended individual(s), NRCS will perform the actions described in paragraphs (c)(1) through (c)(3) of § 652.22.

(e) NRCS may terminate an agreement with a recommending organization if concerns or problems with its accreditation program, its recommendations for certification, or other requirements under the agreement arise.

(f) NRCS may also enter into an agreement with a recommending organization that NRCS determines has an adequate accreditation program to certify individuals as technical service providers for specific practices or categories of technical service in accordance with this part.

(g) After submission of an Application for Certification under § 652.21, NRCS may certify an individual that has an appropriate specialty certification, including a sustainability specialty certification, as qualified to provide technical services for a specific practice, category, or categories of technical service.

(h) NRCS will identify, on its website, which recommending organi-

zations or specialty certifications are recognized by NRCS as meeting NRCS quality criteria for certification of individuals under this part.

[75 FR 6845, Feb. 12, 2010, as amended at 84 FR 19703, May 6, 2019]

#### § 652.26 Certification renewal.

(a) NRCS certifications are in effect for a time period specified by NRCS in the Certification Agreement, not to exceed 3 years and automatically expire unless they are renewed for an additional time period in accordance with this section.

(b) A technical service provider may request renewal of an NRCS certification by:

(1) Submitting a complete certification renewal application to NRCS or through a private sector entity, a public agency, or a recommending organization to NRCS at least 60 days prior to expiration of the current certification;

(2) Providing verification on the renewal form that the requirements of this part are met; and

(3) Agreeing to abide by the terms and conditions of a Certification Agreement.

(c) All certification renewals are in effect for a time period specified by NRCS in the Certification Agreement, not to exceed three years and before expiration, may be renewed for subsequent time period in accordance with this section.

### Subpart C—Decertification

#### § 652.31 Policy.

In order to protect the public interest, it is the policy of NRCS to maintain certification of those technical service providers who act responsibly in the provision of technical service, including meeting NRCS standards and specifications when providing technical service to participants. This section, which provides for the decertification of technical service providers, is an appropriate means to implement this policy.

#### § 652.32 Causes for decertification.

A State Conservationist, in whose State a technical service provider is certified to provide technical service,

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may submit a Notice of Proposed Decertification to the Deputy Chief for Programs recommending decertification of the technical service provider in accordance with these provisions if the technical service provider, or someone acting on behalf of the technical service provider:

(a) Fails to meet NRCS standards and specifications in the provision of technical services;

(b) Violates the terms of the Certification Agreement, including but not limited to, a demonstrated lack of understanding of, or an unwillingness or inability to implement, NRCS standards and specifications for a particular practice for which the technical service provider is certified, or the provision of technical services for which the technical service provider is not certified;

(c) Engages in a scheme or device to defeat the purposes of this part, including, but not limited to, coercion, fraud, misrepresentation, or providing incorrect or misleading information; or

(d) Commits any other action of a serious or compelling nature as determined by NRCS that demonstrates the technical service provider's inability to fulfill the terms of the Certification Agreement or provide technical services under this part.

[75 FR 6845, Feb. 12, 2010, as amended at 79 FR 44640, Aug. 1, 2014]

### § 652.33 Notice of proposed decertification.

The State Conservationist will send by certified mail, return receipt requested, to the technical service provider proposed for decertification a written Notice of Proposed Decertification, which will contain the cause(s) for decertification, as well as any documentation supporting decertification. In cases where a private sector entity or public agency is being notified of a proposed decertification, any certified individuals working under the auspices of such organization who are also being considered for decertification will receive a separate Notice of Decertification and will be afforded separate appeal rights following the process set forth below.

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### § 652.34 Opportunity to contest decertification.

To contest decertification, the technical service provider must submit in writing to the Deputy Chief for Programs, within 20 calendar days from the date of receipt of the Notice of Proposed Decertification, the reasons why the Deputy Chief for Programs should not decertify, including any mitigating factors as well as any supporting documentation.

[79 FR 44640, Aug. 1, 2014]

### § 652.35 Deputy Chief of Programs decision.

Within 40 calendar days from the date of the notice of proposed decertification, the Deputy Chief for Programs will issue a written determination. If the Deputy Chief for Programs decides to decertify, the decision will set forth the reasons for decertification, the period of decertification, and the scope of decertification. If the Deputy Chief for Programs decides not to decertify the technical service provider, the technical service provider will be given written notice of that determination. The decertification determination will be based on an administrative record, which will be comprised of the Notice of Proposed Decertification and supporting documents, and if submitted, the technical service provider's written response and supporting documentation. Both a copy of the decision and administrative record will be sent promptly by certified mail, return receipt requested, to the technical service provider.

[79 FR 44640, Aug. 1, 2014]

### § 652.36 Appeal of decertification decisions.

(a) Within 20 calendar days from the date of receipt of the Deputy Chief for Program's decertification determination, the technical service provider may appeal in writing to the NRCS Chief. The written appeal must state the reasons for appeal and any arguments in support of those reasons. If the technical service provider fails to appeal, the decision of the Deputy Chief for Programs is final.

(b) Final decision. Within 30 calendar days of receipt of the technical service

provider's written appeal, the Chief or his designee, will make a final determination, in writing, based upon the administrative record and any additional information submitted to the Chief by the technical service provider. The decision of the Chief, or his designee, is final and not subject to further administrative review. The Chief's determination will include the reasons for decertification, the period of decertification, and the scope of decertification.

[75 FR 6845, Feb. 12, 2010, as amended at 79 FR 44640, Aug. 1, 2014]

**§ 652.37 Period of decertification.**

The period of decertification will not exceed 3 years in duration and will be decided by the decertifying official, either the Deputy Chief for Programs or the Chief of NRCS, as applicable, based on their weighing of all relevant facts and the seriousness of the reasons for decertification, mitigating factors, if any, and the following general guidelines:

(a) For failures in the provision of technical service for which there are no mitigating factors, *e.g.*, no remedial action by the technical service provider, a maximum period of three years decertification;

(b) For repeated failures in the provision of technical assistance for which there are mitigating factors, *e.g.*, the technical service provider has taken remedial action to the satisfaction of NRCS, a maximum period of one to two years decertification; and

(c) For a violation of Certification Agreement terms, *e.g.*, failure to possess technical competency for a listed practice, a period of one year or less, if the technical service provider can master such competency within a year period.

[75 FR 6845, Feb. 12, 2010, as amended at 79 FR 44640, Aug. 1, 2014]

**§ 652.38 Scope of decertification.**

(a) When the technical service provider is a private sector entity or public agency, the decertifying official may decertify the entire organization, including all the individuals identified as authorized to provide technical services under the auspices of such organi-

zation. The decertifying official may also limit the scope of decertification, for example, to one or more specifically named individuals identified as authorized to provide technical services under the organization's auspices or to an organizational element of such private sector entity or public agency. The scope of decertification will be set forth in the decertification determination and will be based upon the facts of each decertification action, including whether actions of particular individuals can be imputed to the larger organization.

(b) In cases where specific individuals are decertified only, an entity or public agency must file within 10 calendar days an amended Certification Agreement removing the decertified individual(s) from the Certification Agreement. In addition, the entity or public agency must demonstrate that, to the satisfaction of the Deputy Chief for Programs, the entity or public agency has taken affirmative steps to ensure that the circumstances resulting in decertification have been addressed.

[75 FR 6845, Feb. 12, 2010, as amended at 79 FR 44640, Aug. 1, 2014]

**§ 652.39 Mitigating factors.**

In considering whether to decertify, the period of decertification, and scope of decertification, the deciding official will take into consideration any mitigating factors. Examples of mitigating factors include, but are not limited to the following:

(a) The technical service provider worked, in a timely manner, to correct any deficiencies in the provision of technical service;

(b) The technical service provider took the initiative to bring any deficiency in the provision of their technical services to the attention of NRCS and sought NRCS advice to remediate the situation; and

(c) The technical service provider took affirmative steps to prevent any failures in the provision of technical services from occurring in the future.

**§ 652.40 Effect of decertification.**

(a) The Department will not make payment under a program contract for the technical services of a decertified technical service provider that were

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provided during the period of decertification. Likewise, NRCS will not procure, or otherwise enter into an agreement for, the services of a decertified technical service provider during the period of decertification.

(b) National decertification list. NRCS shall maintain a current list of decertified technical service providers. NRCS shall remove decertified providers from the list of certified providers. Participants may not hire a decertified technical service provider. It is the participant's responsibility to check the decertified list before hiring a technical service provider. Decertification of a technical service provider in one State decertifies the technical service provider from providing technical services under current programs in all States, the Caribbean Area, and the Pacific Basin Area.

### § 652.41 Effect of filing deadlines.

A technical service provider's failure to meet the filing deadlines under this subpart will result in the forfeiture of appeal rights. All filings must be received by NRCS no later than the close of business (5 p.m.) the last day of the filing period.

### § 652.42 Recertification.

A decertified technical service provider may apply to be re-certified under the certification provisions of this part after the period of decertification has expired. A technical service provider may not utilize the certification renewal process in an attempt to be recertified after being decertified.

## PART 653—TECHNICAL STANDARDS

Sec.

- 653.1 General.
- 653.2 Technical standards and criteria.
- 653.3 Adaptation of technical standards.
- 653.4 Availability of technical standards.

AUTHORITY: 7 CFR 2.62.

SOURCE: 43 FR 58079, Dec. 12, 1978, unless otherwise noted.

### § 653.1 General.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is responsible for the technical adequacy of conservation practices installed under all NRCS programs, and those practices applied

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under programs administered by the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) where NRCS has the technical responsibility. NRCS technical or financial assistance will be provided when the practices are applied according to established technical standards.

### § 653.2 Technical standards and criteria.

Technical standards and criteria have been established for all conservation practices. They provide the guidance and direction needed to assure that the practices meet the intended purpose and are of the quality needed to assure lasting for the design life. Standards and criteria are developed in consultation with universities, research institutions, and individual industrial and private firms and individuals. Research information and practical experience are used in setting standards. Changes and new technical standards and criteria are prepared in the same manner as set out above.

### § 653.3 Adaptation of technical standards.

Technical standards and criteria developed on a national basis may require special adaptation to meet local needs. These adaptations must be approved by the Administrator of the Natural Resources Conservation Service or his designee.

### § 653.4 Availability of technical standards.

Information on technical standards used by NRCS is available at field, area, or State offices of NRCS.

## PART 654—OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

### Subpart A—General

Sec.

- 654.1 Purpose and scope.
- 654.2 Definitions.

### Subpart B—Federal Financially-Assisted Projects

- 654.10 Operation and maintenance agreement.
- 654.11 Sponsor(s)' responsibility.
- 654.12 Financing operations and maintenance.